

‘A KIND OF FISSURE’: FORMA (1947–1949)

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We declare ourselves to be Formalists and Marxists, convinced that the terms Marxism and Formalism are not irreconcilable, especially today when the progressive elements of our society must maintain a revolutionary avant-garde position and not give over to a spent and conformist realism that in its most recent examples have demonstrated what a limited and narrow road it is on.¹

These are the opening lines of Forma’s manifesto, signed in Rome in March 1947 by eight young artists: Carla Accardi, Ugo Attardi, Pietro Consagra, Piero Dorazio, Mino Guerrini, Achille Perilli, Antonio Sanfilippo and Giulio Turcato. They had met during the previous year through the realist painter, Renato Guttuso, a fellow member of the Italian Communist Party (the PCI) and a would-be mentor to them. Guttuso was on a trip to Paris when Forma signed their manifesto in his studio, a place where he had been letting many of them stay. With its contemptuous dismissal of realism, together with the method of its execution, Forma’s manifesto came as a compound rejection of Guttuso’s art, his hospitality and his network of connections, and it acted as a deliberate gesture of rupture, one which announced Forma’s ambitions to belong to ‘a revolutionary avant-garde’. In the discussion that follows, I connect Forma’s rhetoric of rupture with a more complex socio-political context, and I move to engage their art as a gesture of historical resistance worked through their reimagined return to the theories of Russian Formalism. In conclusion, I switch to a wider lens to suggest that the antithetical movements of rupture and return that Forma’s art presents can be identified as a part of a Gramscian symptom in a struggle for a ‘new culture’.²

Unlike the older Guttuso, the members of Forma were, for the most part, the children of a fascist generation, and among the first artists to come of age in post-war Italy. Widespread at the time was the call for an anti-fascist



Figure 1 Carla Accardi, *Scomposizione*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 33 x 55.5 cm. Museo del Novecento, Milan. © Comune di Milano, all rights reserved. Courtesy of Museo del Novecento. Photo: Luca Carrà.

rhetoric, although how this should be articulated was proving divisive. The competing demands for artistic autonomy and political commitment formed a tightrope along which many artists were feeling their way, negotiating new artistic freedom while staying loyal to an anti-fascist politics that was often expressed in Marxist terms. Tortured debates were taking place between groups of artists across Italy, which ruminated on the binaries of form and content, and the political implications of each.³ Several contemporary writers, film-makers and artists, such as Guttuso, held content to be most important, and realism was considered by many to be the only legitimate mode of artistic address in a post-war and post-fascist Italy. This was, in part, because of Marxist demands to bring home the harsh realities of ubiquitous poverty in a legible form, and, in part, also because of the perceived redundancy of Italian modernist art after Futurism's close relationship with fascism during Mussolini's regime, condemned by many as almost symbiotic. Walter Benjamin had written that their entwinement had led to the aestheticisation of politics, and like Benjamin had done, many in Italy were now calling instead for the politicisation of aesthetics.⁴

Guttuso may have sought his revenge for Forma's betrayal a few years later when he painted his widely acclaimed canvas 'Boogie Woogie' (1953), in which a group of teenagers dance in a basement bar. The title suggests that the figures dance to the boogie woogie, the big band swing hit, which had been played by the U.S. forces on their entry into the Italian capital in 1944. Mondrian's painting 'Broadway Boogie Woogie' (1942) hangs against the back wall, reduced to a piece of disco decoration and ignored by the dancers. The coloured plaid shirts worn by many of the dancers repeat the squares of Mondrian's painting, creating what Romy Golan has described as a 'bad gestalt'.⁵ The painting was Guttuso's scathing critique of what he saw to be the superfluous place of abstract art and the American mass culture, which in his view accompanied it. In the group of gyrating figures, various faces of the artists of Forma can be recognised.⁶

But if Guttuso had included the artists of Forma in his caricature of geometric abstraction, then he had miscast them. For Forma had been clear from the start that their art was not abstract, at least not wholly abstract. In the small journal *Forma 1* in which they published their manifesto in April 1947, several of them had written short articles where they had stated this position.⁷ In his piece 'Astrattisti a Milano', Achille Perilli wrote that, in contrast to both Kandinsky's version of abstraction and the geometric abstraction of Max Bill, both of whose works had been exhibited in Milan earlier in the year, Forma was interested in form as it appeared in relation to the external world.⁸ The external world's importance to Forma's abstraction was also affirmed in their manifesto: '[i]n our work we use the forms of objective reality as means to attain objective abstract forms; we are interested in the form of the lemon, and not the lemon'.⁹ Instead of tracing the outlines of an immaterial realm, and turning their backs on the outside world, the artists of Forma claimed their art was linked to it. Although they were interested in the 'form of the lemon and not the lemon', the lemon's existence remained vital.

'Forma' in Italian means both the command 'form!' in the imperative tense, as well as the noun 'form'. The name could act as a rallying call, as though setting up an almost militaristic counter position to the encroachment of realism on art practice and its increasingly favoured position in Italian Marxist circles. Forma's opening lines signalled their intent to push back further against accepted Marxist wisdom, and they declared not only realism to be spent and conformist but also that Marxism and Formalism were 'not



Figure 2 Antonio Sanfilippo, *Paesaggio*, 1947, 1/47. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 cm. Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome. © Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome. Courtesy of Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome.

irreconcilable'. This was a reference to the earlier criticism of the Russian Formalists' systematic theory of literature, which had been made by Marxist theorists on the basis that such a purely formal system ignored the material conditions in which art and literature were produced, and with which they should be in communication. Leon Trotsky's attack on the Formalist School in *Literature and Revolution* (1924) had concluded: '[t]hey believe that "In the beginning was the Word". But we believe that in the beginning was the deed. The Word followed, as its phonetic shadow'.¹⁰ The Forma manifesto's oblique reference to this earlier divorce acted, then, in the first instance to link Forma's artistic theory with the Russian Formalists and, in turn, was an attempt to rupture with any political fiat on artistic style. For Forma to defy Guttuso's PCI-sponsored realism may have been daring, but to attempt to resurrect the concepts of Russian Formalism in a visual art form as a valid Marxist alternative, ran greater risks including that of being dismissed as disingenuous or just naïve. Through the following exploration of some

of Forma’s early artworks, I argue that these artists should be understood as neither.

These were years of flux, before the demarcating lines of the Cold War had hardened, and when political and social discourses were opening up after Mussolini’s *ventennio*, the twenty years of his fascist regime. There was now space and time where new social and political links with art might be possible, and there was a chance to find an alternative to the apparently factual but in fact surface sight of realism. Out of a seemingly regressive turn to an earlier movement, Forma, I suggest, proposed an evolutionary rupture, one that in the first instance could act to renegotiate the recent past of Futurism’s relationship with fascism. Breaking with the past had been the founding declaration of Futurism, but now, after the war, there was a need to break with Futurism’s past. Using a rhetoric of declarations, denunciations and bans which, as Achille Perilli writes, deliberately echoed the style of Marinetti’s manifestos, Forma’s manifesto outwardly seemed to turn away from Futurism in their identification as Formalists, whilst implicitly reaffirming aspects of its method.¹¹ Forma’s choice to invoke Russian Formalism through Marinetti’s rhetoric can be read as a proposal for a different legacy for the Italian avant-garde. Indeed, these artists may have seen in Russian Formalism an alternative thread in Futurism’s history as the Formalists had, after all, emerged out of the Russian Futurists, the group of artists and poets that had split from their Italian associates in the early 1910s.

Rather than the artwork acting as a site through which a Futurist flight into a technological future might be materialised, these artists sought to break it down to its formal parts, many of which they identified in terms that had developed out of Formalist concepts, such as *faktura* [texture]. A link between the Formalist theory of the systems of language and a theory of the systems of art had already been made by the Constructivists. Working in the early 1920s, they had drawn from the Formalist model of a systematic analysis to establish a set of artistic principles, such as structuring and handling of material, which could be applied in the production of useful goods in a communist society.¹² Although the artists of Forma had not seen any original works made by the Constructivists, Piero Dorazio writes that they had seen photos of their work reproduced in books.¹³ Some of Constructivism’s approaches to thinking through Formalist ideas seem to parallel some of Forma’s experiments, and traces of Constructivist thought can be made out in one of their manifesto’s

declarations: '[f]orm is a means and an end ... the goal of a work of art is usefulness'.¹⁴

Although Forma's manifesto had been published in April 1947, it was only in October and November of that year that they had produced enough works to hold their first exhibitions in Rome: one at the Art Club, co-founded by the former Futurist Enrico Prampolini and Joseph Jarema, and another at the nearby Studio of Modern Art. Whilst some literature on Forma dates their existence to between 1947 and 1951, the most consistent artworks which Forma made as a group date from between 1947 and 1949, when Dorazio writes, 'the Forma experience came to an end ... [and] we turned to abstract art without any reference to elements of the visible world'.¹⁵

The works by Carla Accardi, Antonio Sanfilippo and Ugo Attardi from 1947 connect most closely to each other in their exploration of the movement of form in the visible world. These small canvases are painted lightly with small shapes of patchwork colours, many with loosely brushed blurry edges that seem to resist the neater lines of a machine aesthetic of geometric abstraction (1947, figures 1–4). Thin borders of unpainted canvas

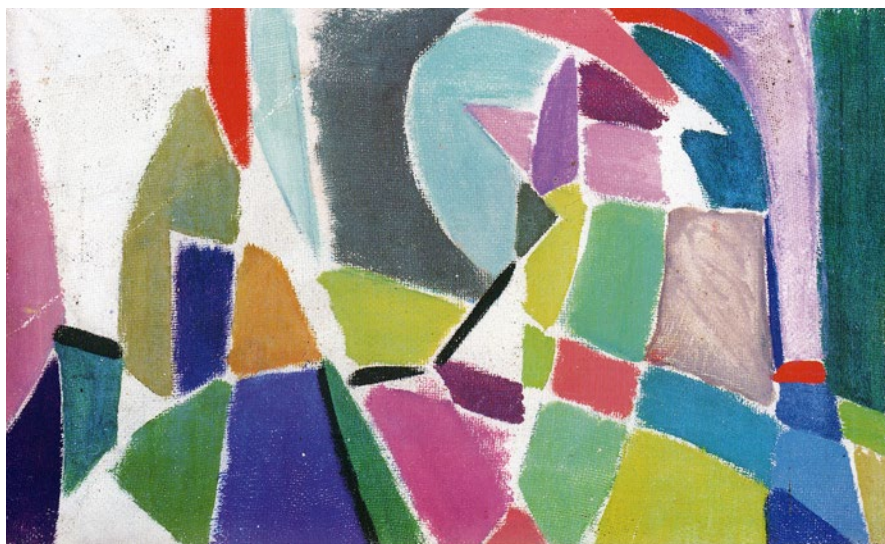


Figure 3 Antonio Sanfilippo, *senza titolo*, 1947, 12/47. Oil on canvas, 19 x 42 cm. Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome. © Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome. Courtesy of Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome.

run between the small shapes and form slivers of white lines, which lengthen as they continue to lead the eye around what can turn out to be larger ovular, triangular or rectangular shapes. Or else these larger shapes appear to the eye first, before they separate into their smaller parts. In both scenarios, motion between the shapes, or forms, is created through the flow of lines and differences in scale, and this occurs despite the separation made by the delicate white borders that run between. Movement can be evoked, it seems, without being illustrated, an outwardly different tactic perhaps to that of Futurism, with its more obvious whirring lines and forwardly slanted angles.

Movement is also evoked in Accardi's *Scomposizione (Anti-composition)* (1947) where lines from the edges of geometric shapes create staggered frames (figure 1). Against stronger colours, the use of light blues, pale yellows and greys open up an airy depth, which the linear frames overlap at different angles to suggest a vortex. The interruptions made by jagged triangles, which are layered through the frames, form a counter flow to the direction of the vortex, and as the title of the work describes, ruptures any settled composition. This dynamic set up between turning spiral and resistant fragmentation, present also in Attardi's *ricerca cromatica (colour research)* (figure 4) can be compared with the Constructivist Liubov Popova's *Space Force Constructions* (1920–1921). However, where Popova's earlier geometry of perfect lines and arcs show the mechanical accuracy of the compass and ruler with which they were constructed, Accardi's are less diagrammatic with more crooked and blurred edges to her shapes and with traces of pencil left in between, as if to simultaneously expose the formal elements of material, colour and pencil with the hand-held method of their creation. Different to Constructivism's bid for the formal artwork to have a scientific status, Forma's project was an exploration of a more subjective experience of form, acknowledging the changes made by light and space that occurred in the perceptual process.

Where Constructivist works deliberately used an economy of colour as an aesthetic refusal and as a signal of the scientific intent of their work, the works of Forma use many colours. Their manifesto had identified colour as one of the formal properties in which they were interested: '[t]he painting has as its means of expression, colour, drawing, materials, and as their goal a harmony of forms'.¹⁶ However, between coloured shapes, patches of canvas

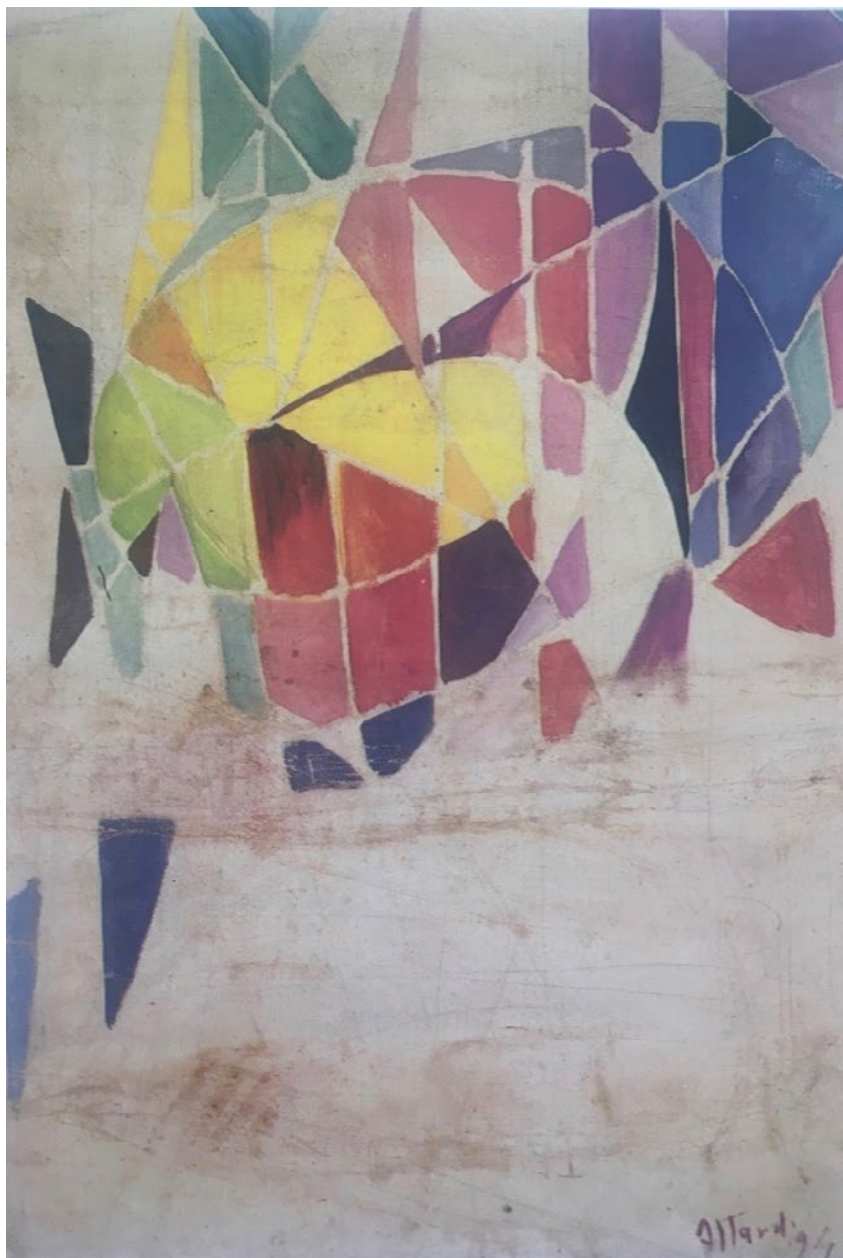


Figure 4 Ugo Attardi, *ricerca cromatica*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm. Whereabouts unknown. © Archivio Storico Ugo Attardi, Rome.

are often left bare, exposing both structure and texture, a similar investigation which the Constructivists had undertaken. In Sanfilippo's *senza titolo* (untitled) (1947), these empty quarters also act as if to check and balance the colours' slide towards a harlequin effect, and break up any pull towards pictorial composition (figure 3). In Attardi's *cromatica ricerca*, (colour research) a half-bare canvas appears turned over to a site for testing out relationships between colours (figure 4). The structural diagonals of unpainted straight lines which intersect through these colours, as well as the work's scientific vocabulary, echo Constructivist terminology. But the rainbow spectrum which spreads out through the fracturing spiral brings the work to an aesthetic point beyond formal investigation, an uncertain place which is perhaps signalled by the further drawn out shapes which have been left empty.

The Russian Constructivists, who considered the materiality of the art object to be central, took up the concept of texture. It was one of the three fundamental elements of Constructivist production, the other two being structure and the organisation of material.¹⁷ Its original identification as a formal property had been made, however, by the Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who saw it as a device which could act to deflect immediate recognition in the mediating process of de-familiarisation. Shklovsky had written in his essay 'Regarding Texture and Counter-Reliefs' that: '[a]rt is [...] a collection of things having volume, but no substance – texture. Texture is the main feature of that special world of especially constructed things, the aggregate of which we usually call art'.¹⁸ Transposed into Forma's works, this indistinct concept may have played out in diverse ways, for example, in Piero Dorazio's *Leda* (1949, figure 5). Here constructions are built through the formal properties of line and colour, and the curved and v-shaped lines, together with the juxtapositions of white and red, play with the allusion to the story of Leda and the swan, the myth to which the title refers. Like Leda, who did not recognise Zeus when he took the form of a swan, the viewer is denied recognition, and the deflection and camouflage, which play through the formal properties of the work, are key in bringing about this sensation of perception without knowledge.

Shklovsky had considered the concept of de-familiarisation a central aspect of artistic device, one which could convey sensation more closely than any descriptive method of realism. He describes the aim of his concept in his essay 'Art as Technique':



Figure 5 Piero Dorazio, *Leda*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 62 x 55cm. Archivio Piero Dorazio, Milan. © DACS 2018. Courtesy of Archivio Piero Dorazio.

[a]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.¹⁹

In a similar approach to Dorazio's *Leda*, other works by Forma artists use titles to set up an expectation of recognition which is then denied, in a process which may act out a version of de-familiarisation, for example, in Sanfilippo's *Paesaggio* (*Landscape*) (figure 2) or Dorazio's *Il Ponte di Carlo* (*The Charles Bridge*), (1947, figure 10). In Sanfilippo's *Paesaggio*, small dark coloured lines are grouped in little areas scattered around the work, as though accentuating and distinguishing structural objects within a landscape. The patches of blue in upper segments of the canvas appear skyward, with lower segments dominated by oranges, reds, and yellows, the oxide colours of buildings in Rome. Although these colours might point towards such a topography, the jutting shapes and the occasional interruptions made by other colours deflect any easy definition of ground and sky, and perception of the visible world is only implied while the viewer is caught up in a process of recognition and estrangement.

A different experiment with the concept of texture might be found in Mino Guerrini's work *Il Sariga* (*The Opossum*) (1948), which he described in a later interview as having been made out of mixing oil with tempera, and lentils with salt, together with the colours of a blue Lancia and a grey Fiat (1948, figure 6).²⁰ This work engages a specificity of place with its use of Italian car paints, and such industrial materials might also activate a more political current, again suggested by its title. The latter is the name of an opossum, a colonising marsupial, native only to the Americas and unknown in Italy. The work's date of 1948 could render this a comment on the form of economic and cultural imperialism which had just arrived in Italy under the guise of relief by the US-sponsored Marshall Plan. The Plan gave out grants for post-war reconstruction and invested in cultural projects, for example, in Cinecittà (the film studios in Rome), with the aim of buffering the spread of communism's appeal. In Guerrini's work lentils, a humble staple, mixed together with Italian car paints, are embodied in the texture of this image of an American rat. Cast in this light, Guerrini's experiments prefigures both Alberto Burri's use of humble materials in his *Sacchi*, and Alighiero Boetti's *I colori* where Boetti stamped the name of a colour in a monochrome of that colour. Boetti's works would use the industrial colours from Fiat, Moto, Guzzi and Vespa during the car factory clashes in Turin in the late 1960s, and the artist later explained that through the tautology of same colour with same word, he aimed to 'collapse the analytical superstructures'.²¹ Whilst



Figure 6 Mino Guerrini, *Il Sariga*, 1948. Oil, tempera, lentils, salt, car paints on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. Collezione Achille Perilli, Orvieto. © DACS 2018. Courtesy of Collezione Achille Perilli, Orvieto.

Guerrini's work is less ambitious than Boetti's, his earlier use of car paints in what appears to be a latent gesture of resistance, foreshadows Boetti's political play with these same industrial materials.

Forma's interest in the factual quality of formal elements can also be read as a rejection of the frenetic vision of Futurism's machine dream, especially as this had been manifested in the hubristic and vertiginous views of *aeropittura* (aeropainting), its final incarnation in the later years of the fascist regime in the 1930s and 40s. Breaking down the surface composition of painting and revealing its artifice might appear to repeat a much earlier modernist moment, but its late appearance in Forma's art was perhaps less a repetition when Italian modernism had been dominated by Futurism's illusion. Dorazio explained that Forma's interest in formal properties was partly motivated by

such disillusionment with painting’s fiction: ‘[I]t is necessary to understand the mechanism of the artifice [...] The artifice is not enough in itself, it stays artificial’.²²

Russian Formalist theories had been introduced to Forma by Angelo Ripellino, a poet and professor of Russian literature at Rome University. Dorazio, Guerrini and Perilli had met him when they were attending the free film courses offered at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome in 1946. Between watching avant-garde films, ranging from the works of Buñuel and Carné to Clair and Eisenstein, Ripellino had shown them books with some of the works by artists and writers of the Russian avant-gardes which were mostly unknown in the artistic circles of post-fascist Rome. Dorazio recalls:

Nobody knew of Malevich’s existence. Ripellino was the only one in Rome to know these things [...] he had many books which he had procured in Prague. And in them one could see Rodchenko, Tatlin and others, that in 1946 and 1947 nobody knew in Rome. Ripellino read and translated Mayakovsky’s poetry for us; and also the little poets of Stalin’s court. This made us think that current Soviet culture had been built on the ruins of Revolutionary culture. The latter was the culture that really fascinated us, and made us look forward to a Socialist future of the entire world.²³

Forma, then, saw the earlier Russian avant-gardes as belonging to an original revolutionary culture which had been ruined by Stalin, and, as such, Forma could cast them as the antithesis of autocratic rule. Forma’s attraction to the resistance of authority is manifested in various ways through their work, for example, in the anti-compositional devices at work in Accardi’s *Scomposizione* (*Anti-composition*), and Sanfilippo and Attardi’s scattered blank spaces (figures 1 – 4). The small measurements of Forma’s works, often not much more than 50cm in width and height, also signal as anti-authoritarian in their inverse proportion to the monumental fascist art in Rome, or the huge Soviet statues of Tito and Stalin, which Dorazio, Guerrini and Perilli had seen in Prague in the summer of 1947 at the communist World Festival of Youth.²⁴

As part of the same anti-authoritarian gesture, these small canvases of blurred geometric shapes might also have acted to resist the weight of the long Italian humanist tradition of figuration. Whilst Marinetti had apparently

propelled Italian art forward out of the shadow of figuration in 1909 through his manifesto's rejection of the art of the past, the later 'call to order' and the formation of the Novecento movement, saw many Futurists such as Gino Severini return to figuration. In the list of rejections in Forma's manifesto, a ban is imposed on art which 'posits nature as the starting point', and which shows the 'tendency at inserting human details [...] by the use of deformation, psychological ploys, and other contrivances'.²⁵ By re-inserting into Italian culture a self-aware modernist art, Forma could make an attempt to break from both Futurism and figuration's trajectories which had seen them become active agents both for fascism and now, through realism, for Stalinism.

What I have argued to be Forma's intricate negotiation of positions vis-à-vis other artistic trajectories complicates any proposal that Forma's art displays detectable symptoms of post-war trauma. The rise of Trauma Studies, prevalent since the 1990s, has produced a slew of readings of post-war art as dominated by the effects of trauma. The pervasive impact of trauma was first diagnosed in Freud's essay on the death drive, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', written after the First World War in 1920. Freud described that when an organism was flooded by traumatic stimuli 'every kind of protective measure [...] will [be] set in motion'.²⁶ Despite developments in trauma theory, this metaphor that trauma moves as a flood, which affects all experience in its reach, remains powerful with the consequence that post-war art can sometimes be submerged by a totalizing reading of trauma. Often, signs of trauma have been detected along a binary of either re-enactment or escapism, with abstract art showing symptoms of the latter: from the geometric abstraction of Max Bill and his circle in Switzerland with its refusal to acknowledge any perception beyond its geometry, to its counterpart in the gestural brushwork of *tachisme* and *art informel*, widespread during the 1950s particularly in France, Italy and Japan. The internationalist style and lack of reference in these artworks has been read as amnesiac and escapist.²⁷ Whilst Forma's art may not re-enact the traumatic event of the war through the gestures of self-abnegation possibly found in Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri's slashes and gouges, its apparent engagement with Italian artistic trajectories and their socio-political histories, does not fit easily with any alternative diagnosis of denial and escapism.²⁸ The trauma of being the children of a fascist generation may have played out in more complex and varied ways than along a simple binary of re-enactment or escapism.



Figure 7 Achille Perilli, *Forme in nevrosi*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 100 x 70 cm. National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rome. © National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rome. Courtesy of National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rome.

Indeed, some Forma members had been clear that, unlike Max Bill's geometric abstraction, their formalism acknowledged the outside world. In his review of Kandinsky and Bill's work for *Forma 1*, Perilli claimed that Forma's art differed from geometric abstraction as 'form, because it belongs in reality is considered in its environment, its dimensional aspect is therefore in space and light'.²⁹ Perilli wrote later that the origin for what he termed 'empirical formalism' (referred to in Forma's manifesto as 'the forms of objective reality') was an adoption of the theory of formalism in Henri Focillon's recently translated *The Life of Forms* (first published in 1934 and translated into Italian in 1945).³⁰ This was a book which traced a morphology of what Focillon described as a 'fourth realm' of forms, which operated through space, mind, time, and matter and interacted with a shifting domain of artistic materials and techniques to produce changes in artistic styles. Like Futurism, Focillon's theory had its roots in vitalism, and for Focillon the artwork was a place of flux, subject to what Focillon identified as a 'principle of metamorphosis', rather than a more controlled site where formal devices operated along a closed system.³¹ Focillon described this realm of forms as:

surrounded by a certain aura [...] we regard it, as it were, as a kind of fissure through which crowds of images aspiring to birth may be introduced into some indefinite realm – a realm which is neither that of physical extent nor that of pure thought.³²

A version of this realm of forms appears illustrated in Perilli's *Forme in nevrosie* (*Forms in neurosis*) (1948), where a pair of jagged shapes appear alive and electrified against an equally charged background (1948, figure 7). Within its furthest brown background, small interlacing lines have been softly indented as if indicating another layer of flux occurring within the colour itself. Accardi perhaps also describes this fluctuating space in her *Composizione* (*Composition*) (1949), where she interweaves silhouetting outlines of black, white and grey curved shapes, which just elude figurative definition (figure 8). This same flux seems to be at work too in the movement between the shapes in Sanfilippo, Accardi, Attardi and Dorazio's works, as previously discussed (figures 1–4, and 6). Again, in Accardi's earlier *Composizione* (*Composition*) (1948), thick black segments between thinner strips of colours throw a movement of light into relief (1949, figure 9). This work can be compared to paintings by Alfred



Figure 8 Carla Accardi, *Composizione*, 1949. Pencil and watercolour on paper, 43 x 30 cm. Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome. © Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome. Courtesy of Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome.

Manessier, and Jean René Bazaine who, together with Léon Gischia, members of Forma had met in Paris in late 1946, and whose works had been exhibited in the 'Pittura Francese d'Oggi' exhibition in Rome that same year. Bazaine's coloured stained-glass works, and Manessier's paintings, which used radiant blues and reds beside strips of black, referenced these artists' exploration of the medieval French tradition, in particular the stained-glass windows of monasteries and cathedrals.³³ Bazaine had, in fact, been taught by Focillon, whose admiration for stained glass windows is described in *The Life of Forms*:

The flat, but limitless expanse of the windows, their images, shifting, transparent disembodied and yet held firmly in place by bands of lead ... all these are like symbols of the eternal transfiguration forever at work on the forms of life, and forever extracting from it forms for another life.³⁴

After Forma had disbanded, Accardi continued to explore the link between fluctuating and settled definition. Her monochrome works from the 1950s

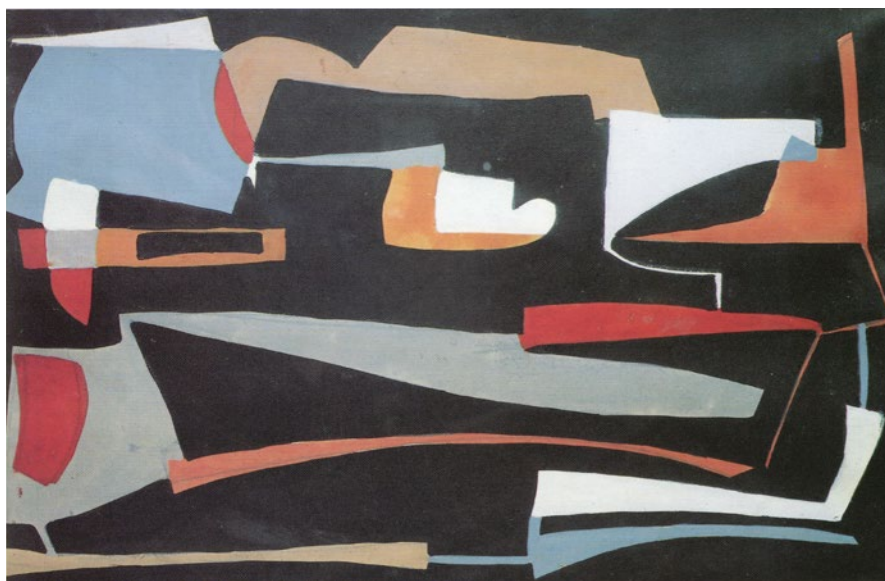


Figure 9 Carla Accardi, *Composizione*, 1948. Tempera on paper, 30 x 20 cm. Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome. © Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome. Courtesy of Archivio Accardi Sanfilippo, Rome.

develop networks of swarming shapes, which play with signification through their allusions to pseudo-calligraphic scripts. In the temporary structures which she made in the 1960s, for example *Tenda (Tent)* (1966), her interest in the liminal space of light’s interaction with form might have recurred.³⁵ Accardi painted waves of coloured patterns on layers of transparent sicofoil through which the passage of light could refract, potentially a plastic version of Focillon’s windows.³⁶

This adoption of Focillon’s formalism combined in Forma’s art with their exploration of Russian Formalist concepts, and it can be seen to have made up their proposition for a new formalism, one which they had claimed in their manifesto was compatible with Marxism. By this, they had not meant that the autonomy of the artwork could now exist within a Marxist theory of historical materialism, and, in their articles in *Forma 1*, Forma had been clear that their art was not abstract.³⁷ Instead, they put forward an ‘empirical formalism’ which opened up the closed autonomy of the formal artwork to a world of moving forms, subject to a universal vital law, which straddled both material and immaterial worlds, and which perception intuited in the ‘visible world’.³⁸ This could be read as another version of the vitalism in which Futurism had been rooted. It could, however, also be viewed as part of a struggle to find a ‘new way of seeing’ which Gramsci had imagined would accompany a new revolutionary culture.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, written while incarcerated by the fascist regime in the 1930s, Gramsci had set out his theory of how a Marxist revolution might be successful in Europe through what he termed a ‘war of position’. Resisting and subverting cultural hegemony could clear a direct warpath for a ‘war of manoeuvre’, a direct socialist revolution against the state. Gramsci viewed raising revolutionary consciousness through multiple tactics as a key strategy for the success of a war of position. In his article ‘Marinetti the Revolutionary?’ written for *L’Ordine Nuovo* in 1921, Gramsci had approved of the methods of rupture made by Marinetti’s early Futurism as an example of stimulating this consciousness.³⁹ As Gramsci’s concern was to engender the historical necessity of a new culture through multiple currents, he rejected any coercive attempts to prescribe a political message onto artistic forms, viewing it to be impossible to predict the precise forms in which a new culture would be born. Gramsci seems to have envisaged that the revolutionary struggle would necessarily take a different perception of form,

a perception that would spawn a different idea of what artists and artworks might be:

It seems evident that, to be precise, one should speak of a struggle [...] for a new moral life that cannot but be intimately connected to a new intuition of life, until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeing reality and, therefore, a world intimately ingrained in 'possible artists' and 'possible works of art'.⁴⁰

In the works which Perilli and Dorazio made during the communist World Festival of Youth in Prague in the summer of 1947, a struggle between different forms is dramatised through the crowded lines and arcs that push against each other. Sometimes specific titles refer to place names, for instance, in Dorazio's *Ponte di Carlo* (*The Charles Bridge*) (1947) where arcs cross horizontally between diagonal red lines, coming close to a topography but where representation is ultimately resisted (1947, figure 10). This colliding movement resembles Gramsci's description of a struggle for a new culture, one which might engender a new way of seeing, and emerging here also as a glimpse of Focillon's indefinite realm of moving forms.

Ultimately, Forma's practice between 1947 and 1949 presents as a series of contradictory movements between ruptures and returns, and which, taken together, might signal a dialectical movement towards a striving for a new culture. Breaking with realism's dominance in Italian Marxist circles through a manifesto which elicited Marinetti's original language of rupture so admired by Gramsci, Forma's experiment seems to have re-imagined the legacy of Futurism through Russian Formalism whilst simultaneously returning to Futurism's vitalist roots. Combining Focillon's empirical formalism with Russian Formalist theories, in an attempt to reconcile Marxism and Formalism, was perhaps a strategy too contradictory to be sustained. Nonetheless, it can be understood as a genuine proposition for a different vision of Marxist art in post-war Italy.

The geopolitics of the Cold War would end these years of flux in which Forma existed. The general elections of 1948 were lost by the PCI, and the US-sponsored Marshall plan kept cultural hegemony in Italy in place, tied up with capitalism. Gramsci's new culture would not be brought forward by Forma, and instead the commodification of Forma's art became inevitable, especially given the image culture of Rome. In the pages of *Forma 1*,



Figure 10 Piero Dorazio *Il ponte di Carlo*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 55 x 66 cm. Archivio Piero Dorazio, Milan. © DACS 2018. Courtesy of Archivio Piero Dorazio, Milan.

photographs of Forma's works are placed beside advertisements for restaurants and shops. With their small portable measurements included below them, these photos can begin to resemble the neighbouring adverts. The spectre of a more cynical age, where an art object became another consumable thing, may have already been emerging as victor in Gramsci's struggle, coming into view in these pages despite all of Forma's declarations to the contrary.

Notes

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- 16 Carla Accardi, Ugo Attardi, Pietro Consagra, Piero Dorazio, Mino Guerrini, Achille Perilli, Antonio Sanfilippo, Giulio Turcato, op. cit.
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